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Plot Construction in Henry Esmond

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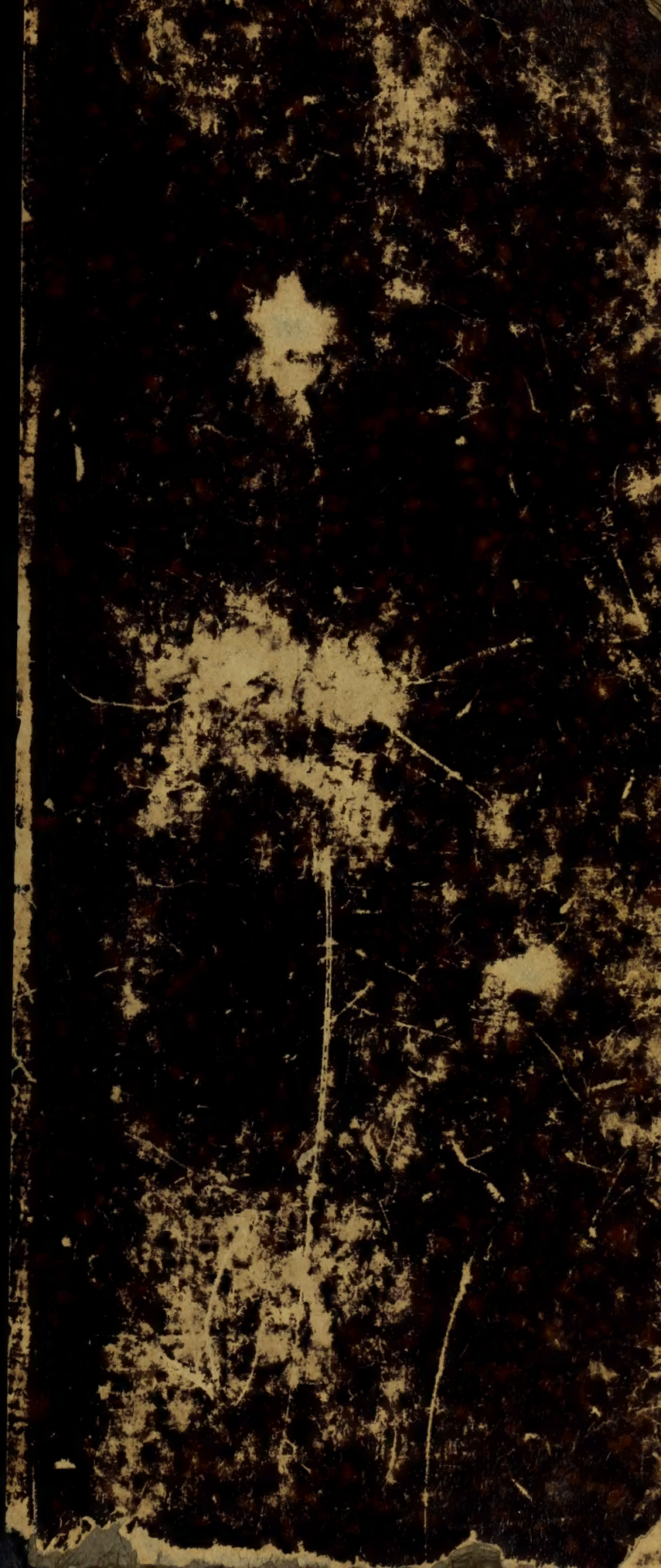

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Plot Construction
in
Henry Esmond

By Daisy Deane Eddings

Thesis

For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
in
English Course
in the
College of Literature and Arts

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Plot Construction in Henry Esmond.

The novel has been the most popular form of literature for the last half century. Authors are producing novels, critics are reviewing them and everyone is reading them. But writers, critics and readers alike seem, at least so far as we can ascertain from anything they have said or written, to have ignored the form of this most characteristic literary development of the nineteenth century. Freytag has produced a treatise on the technique of the drama which is at once comprehensive and conclusive, and leaves little to be said upon the subject. He seems to have discovered, and to have es-

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tablished, once and for all, the laws governing the composition of the drama and his work is accepted as authoritative. But we are far from having any such treatment of the novel. Critics have ignored or evaded all that bears upon its technique and each writer is left to experiment and find out for himself the methods that seem expedient or effective.

The object of this thesis is to set forth the results of a study of the plot of Henry Esmond. Other questions of technique, such as those bearing upon character portrayal, and setting, will be discussed only in their relation to plot. It is evident, since the whole subject of the technique of the novel remains up to this time unexplored, that any results reached by a study no more extensive than that upon which this thesis is based can be only tentative. But in order that the investigation might not be

wholly experimental, it has been made rather by comparing the technique of the novel with that of the drama, than by an independent study.

It therefore becomes necessary to set forth the basis of the comparison and the extent to which the technique of the drama may legitimately be applied to the novel.

The novel and the play are alike in that they both deal with life, incident and character. But the novelist and the playwright must needs use different methods in order to accomplish the end of portraying life. Each has advantages and limitations which the other does not have. The playwright has actors, scenery, stage properties and language to work with. The novelist's only material is language. But, on the other hand, the playwright must introduce his characters and situation, develop his plot and satisfactorily dispose

of his heroes and heroines at the close, all in a play which can be presented in three hours, while the novelist may use as much of the reader's time as he wishes. It necessarily follows that the drama must be more condensed and must dispense with all unnecessary details. It is also evident, since all the effects produced by the drama must be instantaneous, that the dramatist must arrive at clearness at whatever cost.

It will be seen at once, from the differences above noted, differences arising from the fact that one is to be read, and that the other is to be seen and heard, that in many minor details, what is effective in one is not effective in the other, and that laws governing the one form would not hold good in the other.

But in a more general way, in the use of incidents and characters to form a connected story,

the resemblance between the novel and the play is very strong. And it is in the classification of these events and characters, and in the general outlines of plot that a comparison has been attempted, and that the laws of the drama have, later in this thesis, been applied to the construction of the novel.

Three things are essential to every novel — plot, character portrayal, and setting. We might imagine a novel without any setting, that is without any background of time, place and environment. But such a one would be so great a departure from all existing novels that the case need not be considered, and we may adhere to the general statement that every novel contains plot, character portrayal and setting. It may contain other things besides — such as philosophy of life, religious or moral teaching, or the develop-

ment of some theory. (But these latter things do not enter into all novels and are in no way necessary to their construction.

Although plot, character portrayal and setting are entirely different things, yet they must be closely interwoven if the novel is to possess unity. And in fact they do become so interdependent that it is not always easy to draw sharp lines distinguishing between them. This is especially true of plot and character portrayal. Although in life we are continually seeing people do things which we can in no way explain, and which seem entirely inconsistent with all their former acts, yet in fiction we demand that the actions of the characters shall be adequately motived, and if one commits an act which is entirely inexplainable from the former development of that character, then we censure the author for failing to draw

character faithfully. It necessarily follows that the plot and the characters of a novel must be adjusted to each other.

In life we are less surprised when some one whom we do not know does a strange thing, than when some one whom we do know does a thing no stranger, but which seems inconsistent with our previous knowledge of that person. It necessarily follows that in the novel, the more minutely the traits of character are developed, the more careful the author must be to make the acts of that character seem consistent or probable.

In the so-called novel of incident, in which chief attention is given to plot and in which there is no minute development of traits of individuality, the author may take more liberties with the actions of his characters than in the so-called novel of character in which there is minute development of the individual. Janice Meredith

is an extreme example of the first type, Adam Bede of the second. We have no clue to Janice Meredith's character except as we gather it from her actions, and when she commits some fresh piece of folly we do not question its consistency. But if Adam Bede, whose traits of character have been carefully developed, and with whose very habits of thought we have become familiar should do something entirely inconsistent with our impression of him, we should have a right to censure the author for failing in truthfulness in portraying character. Then, when preëminence is given to character development, as certain traits of character are established, certain lines of action are precluded. And while definite events are not made necessary by the minute and full development of character, "yet the general trend of events often may be, or the general outcome may be pretty clearly

foreshadowed.

Henry Esmond may be classed among the novels of character; although it is by no means so extreme an example of the type as is Adam Bede. Yet the development of the characters is quite minute enough to influence the plot. The most striking illustration of this is the final disposal of Beatrix. It would have been impossible after the thorough exhibition of her worldliness and heartlessness to have married her to Esmond and made a model housewife of her. This does not mean that Thackeray could not have supplied the proper motives for such an event, but that if he intended a marriage between Beatrix and Esmond, a different treatment of her character would have been required. It means that plot and character drawing are interdependent, and that an essential change in

one involves a readjustment in the other.

There are two main types of the drama to one of which every play can be reduced; — the tragedy, which begins in repose and passes through a complication of events resulting in the failure of the hero, and the comedy, which begins in repose and passes through a complication of events which finally resolve themselves again into a state of repose. If we attempt to classify our novel, we find that it readily disposes itself under the comedy type. It begins with the reposeful scene in which Henry Esmond is received into the happy family which has just come to take possession of Castlewood, passes through a complication of events, and shows us at the close Henry Esmond and his lady tranquilly settled in peaceful Virginia.

Miss Woodbridge, in her book,

"The drama, its law and its technique", further divides the comedy type into the intrigue, comedy, and the so-called romantic comedy.

In the simplest comedy type there is an arch intriguer who conspires against a victim and finally accomplishes his overthrow. To supply the intriguer with a motive for his scheming, some love interest is frequently employed. If this love interest is sufficiently emphasized it may over-balance the comic interest and the play become more or less serious. This serious comedy she calls "romantic comedy," and such a development, she says, is found in full maturity in Shakespere. Henry Esmond then, since the serious overbalances the comic interest, if we compare it to the drama corresponds to the romantic comedy.

If we follow out the comparison we find that in many of its details our novel complies with the law of the drama. The action

logically divides itself, as does that of the drama, into an introduction, a period of complication, and a conclusion. As in the comedy there is, strictly speaking, no climax and no falling action such as we find in the tragedy. The main body of the plot is all rising action, although there is a point, near the middle of the book, where the fortunes of the hero change and his success begins. The remainder may be called falling action in that it results in a resolution of the complication.

The introduction extends over the first fifty nine pages, or an introductory chapter and the first seven chapters. The introductory chapter at the beginning introduces none of the characters of the novel, and gives no clue whatever to the situation. It serves the purpose which the first scene in a play often serves, sounds the keynote of the novel,

introduces us into the atmosphere in which the characters are to live and move, gives us the author's attitude toward life and his point of view in regard to the society of the time. It has no plot value whatever, except that it puts us in the proper attitude at once to understand the characters and the action about to begin. Chapter one introduces us at once to the situation. Henry Esmond is received into the happy Castlewood family and our interest is aroused in its members. This scene is vivid and dramatic, and, with the descriptions and explanations cut out, would make an excellent opening scene for a play.

Here, at the end of Chapter I, Thackeray has used a device very commonly found in the drama. Lady Castlewood asks Henry Esmond about his former life, and the next five chapters are taken up with giving the substance of his

replies. This very forcibly suggests "The Tempest" Act I, scene ii, in which Prospero tells Miranda, supposedly for her edification, but really to inform the reader or listener things which he must know in order to understand what follows,—the story of their coming to the island. But while the author has used a device characteristic of the drama, he has not used the dramatist's method. The dramatist would have put us in the possession of all the necessary facts in a few brief, condensed lines. In the illustration above referred to, Shakspere has used one hundred eighty-six lines to tell us the whole story of the coming to the island of Prospero and Miranda, and of their life on it during twelve years. Thackeray, although the story he has to tell is no longer, drags us through forty-four pages of confusing and tedious details. It is evident

that the novelist must needs use more space than does the dramatist since he must supply descriptions of scenery and characters and explanations which the dramatist has no need to give because his play is visually represented, but there is for each the same necessity for careful selection of details and the rejection of diffuse and irrelevant data. Thackeray throughout shows this same tendency to overload his plot with insignificant facts and events.

Chapter VI closes the retrospective narration and chapter VII takes up the story where chapter I left off. We are again shown the happy Castlewood family, but we are also shown that forces are already at work which are to disturb the tranquility of the quiet household. And now the introduction is complete. All the principal characters except Mohun and the Pretender have been introduced—

Henry Esmond, Lord and Lady Castlewood, Frank and Beatrix, the Dowager Isabel, Father Holt and Dick Steele. The historical, political and social background has been indicated, and in Lord Castlewood's disposition we see the element which threatens to disturb the happiness of the family group. We see that the introduction in the novel has served exactly the same purpose that it does in the play.

With chapter VIII the rising action begins. Henry Esmond contracts the smallpox and brings it to Castlewood and Lord Castlewood leaves until danger from the contagion is past. The latter's love for his wife fails when her beauty is marred, and the injured wife finds it hard to forgive the negligent husband. The following chapters show how the estrangement increases, and how Lady Castlewood becomes more and more dependent upon the faithful devotion of the boy, Henry Esmond, and the affection

of her children.

Chapter X has very little plot value. It deals largely with Esmond's Esmond's life at the University. The next four chapters develop the entanglement with Mohun who occasioned the complete estrangement of Lord and Lady Castlewood and their final reconciliation and killed Lord Castlewood in a duel. Book I closes with Castlewood's death. With his last words he discloses to Esmond the secret of the latter's birth and appoints him as a guardian over Lady Castlewood and the children. The event of Castlewood's death makes possible the falling action, if such we may call it, which begins some chapters later.

Book II begins with Esmond in prison, cast off by Lady Castlewood, who holds him responsible for her Lord's death. The construction of this whole book is loose. A number of the chapters have no plot value at all, and in fact have no legiti-

mate place from an artistic point of view. The chapters treating of his campaigns and of his relations with Addison are unnecessary and even tedious ~~tedious~~ and uninteresting.

The turning point, or what most nearly corresponds to the turning point or climax, is reached in chapter VI when Esmond, on his return from his first campaign, goes to Walcote and is reconciled with Lady Castlewood. But in the next chapter a new complication arises, when he falls in love with Beatrix. He realizes the hopelessness of his suit, hastens away to war again, and we are dragged through a long and tedious campaign, which has no plot value except that Henry Esmond meets Father Holt in Flanders and learns some facts about his mother's life; that Frank goes to war and indulges in rather wild courses;

that they meet the Chevalier St. George, and that Esmond comes home with a lieutenancy and much honor, whereupon he is presented with a sword at a dinner at Kensington and treated with great respect by his kinswomen. The book closes with the announcement of Beatrix's engagement to Ashburnham, at a time when Esmond's hopes of success with her were highest.

Book III opens with another campaign, in which Esmond is wounded and Frank takes care of him. The Dowager Isabel dies and leaves her fortune to him, and he returns to London and presses his suit with Beatrix. The construction in this book is much more compact than in either of the preceding ones. The first part of it is taken up with a treatment of Beatrix's part in the plot and the remainder with the scheme for the restoration of the Pretender, which resulted in the final resolution of the

complication made by Beatrix. The action of the plot closes at the end of chapter XII, with the finding of Beatrix's note in "Eikon Basilikē", when Esmond loses at once his regard and respect for her, and she no longer stands between him and her mother.

The main body of the plot in every way corresponds to that of the romantic comedy. We have in it the beginning, development and final resolution of the complication. There is no such climax as we find in the tragedy, and no rising and falling action, in the strictest sense of the words, but a continual development leading up to the final resolution.

The last chapter, consisting of eleven pages, picks up the loose threads of the story, and rounds off the close. It tells us of the failure of the plan to restore the Pretender, and of the marriage of Esmond and the lady he had

loved so long and served so faithfully. And in this conclusion, Thackeray has not fallen below the dramatist as regards the selection and arrangement of his material. The conclusion is at once brief, finished and artistic.

Plot has been variously defined, but all the definitions agree to the extent of saying or implying that a plot is a complication of events involving a conflict of forces. More than this it is hardly safe to include in the definition, nor is it necessary. If we add that the events should cluster about or contribute to one main action in order that the plot may have unity, we have a fairly good working definition.

The plot in Henry Esmond consists of the events leading up to the final solution of the problem of life by the hero. The complication is occasioned by the obstacles existing between him and the woman he

loves. The resolution of the complication is brought about by the elimination of these obstacles. The conflict of forces, of course, lies between the complicating and resolving forces.

The characters involved in the conflict of forces are Henry Esmond, Thomas and Isabel Esmond, Francis and Rachel Esmond, Beatrix, Frank, Father Holt, Mohun, James, the Pretender, Dick Steele and Beatrix's lovers. Addison, Swift, the Queen and court, Gen. Webb, the Duke of Marlborough, the Tushers, and Esmond's man, Lockwood, are not involved in the complication and consequently have no part in the plot. They contribute rather to the setting.

The complication in the plot results almost entirely from forces extraneous to the hero and heroine, Henry and Rachel Esmond. But twice is there any real conflict between them, or is one consciously opposed

to the other. The first time is on the day when Henry Esmond brings the small pox from the inn, when Lady Castlewood upbraids him with preferring low company to that at Castlewood. The second is after the death of Francis Lord Viscount when Lady Castlewood visits Harry in the prison and forbids him ever to see her again. Some elements of the complicating force exist at the time the story opens — the difference in age, in birth, and especially Rachel Esmond's early marriage with the Lord Viscount.

Thomas Esmond's part in the plot is introductory. He is responsible for part of the initial complicating force already existing at the opening of the story. He kept secret his marriage with Henry Esmond's mother, thereby depriving his son of the title and forcing him to endure the disgrace of a bar sinister.

Isabel Esmond is for the most

part a complicating force. She keeps, until on her death bed, the secret of Esmond's birth, in the first half of the story, and in the latter part, by bequeathing her fortune to Esmond, thereby increasing his hope of winning Beatrix, still further complicates matters. But at her death she discloses the secret to Rachel Esmond, who learns for the first time of his self-sacrifice for the sake of her and hers.

Viscount Francis is throughout a complicating force. In his disposition we find the initial cause which disturbed the repose at the beginning of the story. He was the disturbing element which made necessary a readjustment of affairs. His death was the event which first made possible the resolution which we have. Temporarily, however, it had the effect of alienating Esmond and his mistress, since she held him responsible for her Lord's death.

Beatrix, in the first part of the story, is a resolving force. It was she who precipitated the quarrel between her father and my Lord Mohun which resulted in the fatal duel. She also was the cause of many of the quarrels which ultimately resulted in the entire estrangement between her father and mother. But in the second half of the story, Beatrix is the chief complicating force. Immediately after the reconciliation between her mother and Esmond, she disturbed the momentary calm by doing nothing but merely being beautiful. And Esmond, captivated by her bright eyes and arch manner, spent the next ten years of his life trying to win the love of a woman who was too vain and too worldly to love. And she ceased to influence him only when he learned that she was not only vain and heartless but that she could compromise her womanhood by encouraging the disgraceful suit of a profligate prince.

Frank Esmond is throughout a resolving force. The part which he plays in the first half of the plot is small. But in the latter half he is indispensable. His marriage and detension at Bruxelles, his conversion to the Catholic faith, and his resemblance to the Pretender made possible the scheme for bringing the Pretender to England, - which resulted in the final resolution.

Father Holt is a sort of connecting link between the various parts of the action. He was the means of bringing to light the secret of Esmond's birth, he was a principal in the conspiracy which resulted in the imprisonment of Lady Isabel and finally occasioned the death of Thomas, Lord Viscount, in the first part of the story, and he reappeared in the latter part to give Esmond proof of the legitimacy of his birth and was probably instrumental in Frank's conversion and marriage at Bruxelles. He contributes always

to the resolving force. He is, however, as regards plot, at least, a minor character, and has no part at all in the scheme of bringing the Pretender to England. His most important plot value consists in the fact that he emphasizes its unity. He forms a sort of constant background in the shifting scenes, now and then stepping forward to take a more important part, to remind us of the continuity of the events pictured.

My Lord Mohun is a resolving force. Twice his bloody hand removes from the scene of action a person who is for the time being the chief complicating force. After completing the estrangement which had begun between Lord and Lady Castlewood, he killed Castlewood in a duel, and later he killed the Duke of Hamilton upon the eve of the latter's marriage to Beatrix, thereby making possible the disclosure to Esmond of her warped and dishonored character when she was tempted by a prince.

The Pretender is a resolving force, since it was through his agency that Beatrix was disclosed to Esmond in a light that put her forever out of his mind, and turned his heart toward the woman whom he had worshipped as a boy, and as a man, reverenced and loved. The Prince moreover serves to connect the historical setting more closely with the plot and to make it an integral part of the novel.

Dick Steele enters very little into the plot. He serves as a sort of link between the plot and the social setting- he introduces Addison and Swift, and gives occasion for a fuller treatment of army life.

Beatrix's lovers serve to add further to the complication. They perhaps are introduced more for the purpose of portraying Beatrix's character than for plot purpose.

All the other characters mentioned in the book are for the purpose of giving a setting. The

Tushers and the Castlewood servants, soldiers, the Queen and court — all these are necessary as a background for the action, but are not involved in the conflict of forces and have no plot value.

It will be seen that some of the characters are introduced into the conflict of forces without being made an integral part of the plot. It might be questioned whether some of the characters introduced only for setting are not superfluous, but that is a point which it is not in the province of this thesis to discuss. But as regards plot, the management of the characters is admirable. Each one seems to have a definite part in the action and seems to perform that part without violating the unity of the plot as a whole.

Thackeray was a diffuse, and it would seem, a careless writer. Upon examination we find a large amount of waste material — matter that might have been left

out without detracting from the novel as a whole. A careful analysis, line by line, of the Henry Esmond shows that out of a total of four hundred two pages, only one hundred eighty pages deal with the plot. Not all of these hundred eighty pages are necessary to it, but they have been used for plot purposes and hence have been counted. This does not mean that all besides the hundred eighty pages is waste material, only that the remainder has no plot value.

The following table gives the total number of lines in each chapter and the number of lines dealing with the plot.

Book I	Chapter I	total, 191	plot, 52
	II	283	98
	III	625	57
	IV	250	17
	V	423	254
	VI	549	244
	VII	310	22

Chapter VIII. total,	346.	plot,	233.
IX	736		362
X	277		41
XI	492		238
XII	370		263
XIII	504		441
XIV	611		528
Total. Book I,	5867		2870.
Book II, Chapter I.	369		135
II	333		168
III	368		83
IV	225		78
V	422		58
VI	267		174
VII	379		128
VIII	261		184
IX	363		—
X	360		78
XI	443		—
XII	203		—
XIII	479		287
XIV	297		4
XV	999		310.
Total Book II,	5768		1687
Book III, Chapter I	544		98
II	545		255

Chapter III	total,	695 - plot,	409
IV		403	195
V		525	35
VI		224	116
VII		404	170
VIII		378	238
IX		530	434
X		541	466
XI		555	328
XII		215	172
XIII		513	445
Total, Book III,		6072	3381
Book II,		5768	1687
Book I,		5867	2470
Totals for entire novel,		17707	7938

It is difficult to estimate the value of any comparison of these figures since some chapters with a comparatively large amount of space given to plot are yet of very small plot value. To illustrate, the introductory chapters, the first seven, have seven hundred forty-four lines bearing on plot, and yet fully half of this space might have been dispensed with without loss of clearness. But in general,

the amount of space devoted to plot in any chapter indicates the relative value of that chapter compared with other chapters, in plot development.

Judging from the amount of space, Book III has the most, and Book II the least plot value of the three books into which the novel is divided, and in these two instances the number of lines does not mislead. For upon examination we find that Book III contains the entire development of the scheme of bringing the exiled prince to England, which effected a resolution of the complication, and a large part of the treatment of the complication resulting from Henry Esmond's attachment to Beatrix, while Book II contains nothing of plot value except Esmond's imprisonment, his reconciliation with Lady Castlewood, the beginning of his love for Beatrix, and his discovery of a few facts connected with his birth, which were not disclosed at Castlewood's death. It contains besides, an account of his acquaintance with

Addison, of his campaigns, and of the rivalry between the Duke of Marlborough and Jem Webb, all of which have absolutely no plot value. The plot value of the latter half of Book I, beginning with chapter XIII where the introduction ends and rising action begins, is great. It contains the beginning of the complication occasioned by Henry Esmond's bringing the small-pox to Castlewood, and the the entire treatment of the estrangement which arose between Lord and Lady Castlewood and of the trouble with Mohun which resulted in the duel, the tragic death of Castlewood, and the disclosure to Esmond of the secret of his birth.

The method of plot development used by Thackeray in this novel is an exceedingly simple one. The story is represented as being told by the hero when an old man. His presentation of events is straightforward and direct, given in the order and manner in which he re-

remembers them to have happened. The whole thing might almost have been taken from the old man's diary, with the exception that now and then there is inserted some explanation, or the account of some event which he could not have known at the time.

The motivation of events is of the simplest kind. The only preparation for the future is a full account of the significant events of the past. There is not a single instance in which a future event is referred to in a definite manner. There are in the whole work but seven instances of anticipative narration, and these are in the nature of general reflections or comments of the old man on the events of his youth as he records them.

The proportion of the plot is on the whole good. The number of pages given to each division is as follows:—

Introduction 5·9 pages.
Rising action 116 "

Falling action 215 pages.
Conclusion 12 pages.

The large amount of space given to falling action is due to the fact that there are a number of chapters not bearing on the plot included — for instance, the account of his campaigns, of Addison, and of the Marlborough-Webb controversy. But the real plot material is evenly divided, and if the superfluous matter were cut out, the turning point would come very near the center of the book. The introduction occupies somewhat more space than its matter justifies, but here again we find a rather large amount of material which does not contribute to plot. The conclusion is well proportioned to the remainder of the plot and is not overburdened with insignificant or superfluous material. It is altogether the most artistic portion of the whole book. In it Thackeray has exercised the art of selection in a most admirable manner, and

~~and~~ has given us an effective and finished close to the novel.

Although it may appear at first reading that Thackeray is a careless writer, when we see the careful attention which he has given to the form of his plot, we are obliged to change our minds. This apparent carelessness is due to the diffuseness of the setting, to the large and sometimes almost confusing number of figures in the background. But if we separate the plot from the remainder of the novel, we find that every detail has received careful attention. Every event is keenly motived. Every character involved in the conflict of forces is made an integral part of the plot. The author has, moreover, handled a large number of people and a complicated series of events without ever losing sight of the main thread running through them all, or forgetting their relation to each other. And he has

so organized his material that he makes his reader see the relation, and makes the whole story seem so clear and simple that the veriest idler would not object to reading it on an August afternoon, if he were only permitted to skip the parts bearing on the historical background.

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